MAKING A DIFFERENCE

STRATEGIES FOR SOLVING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Classroom activities for understanding social change

Do you want to...

- Introduce your students to the vast and complex world of social change with real-life examples of how people and organizations are working to make the world a better place?
- Teach them effective problem-solving strategies that will help them as students and in their future professions?
- Shift their perspective from a problem mindset to a solutions mindset?

You've come to the right place! Our Making a Difference: Strategies for Solving Social Problems course modules are based on a semester-long, undergraduate-level course developed and taught by Scott Sherman of the Transformative Action Institute (TAI). SJN has adapted his exemplary work into an introductory trio of modules to help educators orient their students toward a critical, yet productive stance on tackling social change:

- Part One: Shifting the Focus to Solutions will introduce students to the implications of a problem-centric worldview and help them re-orient to solutions thinking.
- Part Two: Measuring and Maximizing Impact teaches students how to distinguish between outputs and outcomes and identify social change programs that are supported by strong evidence of success.
- Part Three: Discovering What Works examines prizes and rapid results challenges as motivating factors for discovering the best solutions for social problems.

Each module includes discussion prompts, in-class activities, and links to relevant SJN story collections. The Making a Difference modules are based on SJN's in-house Success Factor taxonomy, a framework for understanding the tactics that are crucial to the success or failure of a given social change initiative. Our mission at Solutions Journalism Network is to spread the practice of solutions journalism: rigorous reporting on responses to social problems. We seek to rebalance the news, so that every day people are exposed to stories that help them understand problems and challenges, and stories that show potential ways to respond. Our work with educators and community leaders is designed to creatively engage learners with the challenge of solving complex social challenges in their own communities. These materials are available for educational use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license.

DISCOVERING WHAT WORKS:
PRIZES AND RAPID RESULTS

Prizes and rapid results challenges can both serve as strong motivating factors to discover the best solutions for social problems.

The rapid results strategy was developed in 2007 by the Rapid Results Initiative; the basic premise is to "inspire frontline teams to set unreasonable goals, and harness the intense levels of innovation, collaboration, and execution required to achieve them."

Prizes can encourage social innovation, behavioral change, and individual growth. Although some leaders argue that competitions and prizes are a waste of time and money, both strategies ultimately attempt to leverage common facets of human psychology for the greater good.

Discussion: Prizes and Rapid Results

Time: 15 minutes

Materials: Students need to have read some or all of the stories in two Discovering What Works collections: Using Prizes and Rapid Results.

Step One: Because this collection was designed to also be used as a stand-alone resource for educators, it may contain more stories and discussion questions than you want to devote time to in class. If that is the case, "Copy and Customize" the collection to meet your course needs.

Step Two: Split the class into two groups and assign each to discuss one of the two collections. You might want to use the questions in the collection to guide the discussion or debate. Let them discuss in their groups for 10 minutes.

Step Three: ask each group to summarize the major takeaway points they learned from their assigned collection. How do prizes and rapid results encourage social innovation? You can make this as structured or unstructured as you would like; the point is to prepare the students for the brainstorming activity described on the following pages.

Step Four: Ask each group to nominate a spokesperson to present their summary to the entire class. Each group should present a two-minute high level summary. Note: alternately, you could structure this group discussion following the Jigsaw Classroom model discussed in Making a Difference Part One: Shifting the Focus to Solutions.

DISCOVERING WHAT WORKS: PRIZES AND RAPID RESULTS

Activity: 500 ideas for improving education, part one

Time: 40 minutes

Materials: anything students can write ideas on. Chalkboards/whiteboards will work fine; post-its and butcher paper are also options.

Step One: Announce to the students that they are going to have a competition to win a prize. (Whether the prize is tangible, a few bonus points, or simply bragging rights is up to the instructor - the idea of the competition is merely to spur the contestants to get excited about this activity.) For better or for worse, many college students are extremely competitive and will be motivated to work harder to win a prize even if very little is actually at stake.

Step Two: Divide the students into small groups (teams of three work well) and give them 20 minutes to generate as many ideas as possible for improving education (note: education was picked as an easy entry-level topic because most university students will have at least a few strong ideas about it. You can, of course, select a topic that is more closely tied to your course goals and use that to run this activity!). The goal for the class as a whole is to generate at least 500 unique ideas. In the spirit of brainstorming, these ideas should be as wild and crazy as possible. The idea is for the students to spark innovation, so it's possible that 95 percent of the ideas will be worthless, but it's not the point of this exercise to evaluate the feasibility of the ideas.

Step Three: let the competition begin! Have the students write all their ideas on the boards in the classroom, or on Post-It notes or giant sheets of paper. At the halfway point, announce that there are only 10 minutes left. If they haven't come close to getting halfway to their goal, then encourage them to become even more unconventional in their thinking. There are no wrong answers. Call time after 20 minutes.

Step Four: Give the teams five minutes to choose their best idea.

Step Five: In the final 15 minutes of this activity, the students will pitch their great idea to the class with as much passion as possible. Once the students have chosen their big idea, each team has 60 to 90 seconds to make their pitch for their bold, visionary idea for improving education. They are trying to win over their classmates. At the end, everyone gets to vote for the top two ideas. Hopefully the ideas will be funny, engaging, and thought provoking. Some of them might be wildly unrealistic, but that's OK at this point. We will evaluate them in the second part of the activity.

DISCOVERING WHAT WORKS:
PRIZES AND RAPID RESULTS

Activity: 500 ideas for improving education, part two

Time: 30 minutes

Materials: WiFi access for research

Step One: All of the students in the class are now going to become the judges for the final prize. But in order to do this, they need to find out if there is any evidence that this idea really works. Split the class into three teams led by the three finalist teams (i.e., the teams whose ideas won the earlier vote.) However, there's a twist:

- The teams will each be divided into two sub teams. One of the sub teams will be the True Believers. They will be looking for evidence that their idea could actually work. They will do a "Rapid Results" internet search. They have 15 minutes to find all the confirming evidence they can.
- The other sub team will be the Devil's Advocates. They will be doing their own "Rapid Results" internet search. They have 15 minutes to find all the evidence that shows the idea to be spurious, baseless, and ridiculous.

Step Two: announce to everyone that they have 15 minutes to find as much evidence for or against their team's idea (according to their designated subteam).

Step Three: at the end of the Rapid Results search, each team should have collected quite a bit of evidence. The True Believers in each team will have found some facts to prove that their idea could really work. The Devil's Advocates will have evidence to suggest that it is foolhardy. Give the True Believers and Devil's Advocates within each team 10 minutes to reconcile their differing views so they are ready to pitch the final version of their idea.

Step Four: In the final five minutes, have each of the three finalists give their final 60 to 90 second pitch, trying to explain why their idea could really work, and quickly overcome the biggest objections.

Step Five: Have everyone vote again. They could do this by a show of hands with their eyes closed. At the end, announce the winner of the prize!

Step Six: debrief. Did the motivational component of the prize, the speed, and/or the competition change the way students thought about approaching the problem? How and why? Can they think of any cases in which competition might actually hinder innovation (if no, prompt them to consider issues of access and structural inequity; thinkers with high anxiety levels might find competition makes it more difficult to innovate, for example). Finally, can they apply what they've learned here to social change strategies in the community?